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PERMANENT COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

18-20 TRINITY STREET
HARTFORD, CT 06106-1628

(860) 240-8300

FAX: (860) 240-8314

Email: pcsw@cga.ct.gov

www.cga.ct.gov/PCSW

**Testimony of
Natasha M. Pierre
Associate Legislative Analyst
The Permanent Commission on the Status of Women
Before the
Education Committee
Friday, March 3, 2006**

In Support of:

**S.B. 381, AAC Healthy Food and Beverages in Schools
H.B. 5548, AAC School Reporting of Bullying Incidents**

Good morning Senator Gaffey, Rep. Fleischmann and members of the Committee. My name is Natasha Pierre and I am the Associate Legislative Analyst for the Permanent Commission on the Status of Women. Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of S.B. 381 and H.B. 5548.

S.B. 381, AAC Healthy Food and Beverages in Schools

In regards to S.B. 381, I am testifying on behalf of the PCSW and the Connecticut Women's Health Campaign (CWHC), which is a statewide coalition of organizations representing consumers, providers and policy experts with particular interests in women's health and access to health care. We support passage of this bill, which would limit the distribution of unhealthy beverages and encourage the

distribution of healthy foods and beverages to students in schools, because early nutrition is key to preventing several diseases and conditions that disproportionately affect the lives of women, particularly osteoporosis, obesity, and diabetes, as well as diseases which affect all of us such as cancer and cardiovascular disease.

For example, osteoporosis is a serious degenerative bone condition that affects 28 million people in the United States, the vast majority of whom – a full 80% - are women. Two of the primary causes of osteoporosis are poor nutrition and lack of exercise in childhood and the teen years. In fact, osteoporosis has been characterized as a ‘pediatric epidemic with a geriatric outcome.’ Osteoporosis is largely preventable if children and teens eat properly and get adequate exercise. This is when calcium is deposited in the bones, making them dense and healthy. Later in life, after the age of thirty, calcium is depleted from the bones.

We are also here because obesity, eating disorders, diabetes and other medical conditions can be reduced if our children have access to healthy food at school and at home. Of Connecticut children ages 5-17, 11.5% are considered obese.¹ The childhood obesity rates range from 10.1% to 16.5% in Connecticut towns.² Adolescents who are obese are 50-70% more likely to be so as adults.³

We know that the most inexpensive foods are high in fat and low in nutritional value. Unfortunately, these foods end up in some homes due to the financial constraints of families. However, school is one place that children should not be limited in their choice of healthy foods. Obesity, eating disorders, diabetes and other medical conditions can be reduced if our children have access to healthy food and opportunities for adequate physical activity at school. Additionally, the state saves in the long run by implementing this proposal. Currently, 6.5% of Connecticut’s Medicare expenditures and 11% of its Medicaid expenditures are spent on obesity related costs, totally more than \$500 million dollars.⁴

During this era of skyrocketing health care costs, we cannot afford to ignore the steps that can be taken to *prevent* illness and poor health. We have rules and regulations to protect our children from all sorts of harm – fire codes, building codes and safety rules of all kinds. We can also protect our children from illnesses we know how to prevent, and our society from health care costs we should not have to bear. This proposal is an important step in the right direction. We urge your support.

¹ End Hunger Connecticut, *Healthy Schools-Healthy Kids*, accessed 3/06 at www.endhungerct.org.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

H.B. 5548, AAC School Reporting of Bullying Incidents

The PCSW also supports H.B. 5548, which would require the reporting of verified acts of bullying to the Department of Education. The PCSW and other groups advocating for gender equity in schools have been focusing on sexual harassment and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation against students for many years. We believe the focus on bullying is complementary to this work and may include some but not all instances of sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination.

The American Association of University Women (AAUW) Educational Foundation commissioned a report by the Harris Interactive to survey 2,064 public school students in 8th through 11th grades.⁵ According to the report, the most common forms of harassment in school include making sexual comments, jokes, gestures or looks; spreading sexual rumors; and calling others gay or lesbian. Eighty-three (83%) of girls and 79% of boys report experiencing harassment at some point, and 1 in 4 students report experiencing it often. Seventy-six percent (76%) of students have experienced non-physical harassment while 58% have experienced physical harassment.

Harassment creates an environment of fear in schools, which influences a student's ability to achieve academic excellence and personal confidence. Less than half (46%) of students report never being afraid that someone will hurt or bother them at school. Boys and girls differ in this regard, with boys more likely than girls to report never being afraid that someone will hurt or bother them at school (51% vs. 40%). While girls and boys both experience harassment, girls are more likely to report being negatively affected by harassment in future interactions. Girls are more likely than boys to feel "self conscious" (44% to 19%), "embarrassed" (53% to 32%), and "less confident" (32% to 16%), and; girls are more likely to change their behaviors because of the experience, including not talking as much in class (30% to 18%), and avoiding the person who harassed them (56% to 24%).

In recent years, the resources available to monitor and enforce compliance with Title IX, the federal law prohibiting discrimination on the basis of gender, have been reduced. Therefore, we support any increased focus and resources that will enable local school districts to reduce bullying and harassment and promote an equitable and safe learning environment for all children.

Thank you for raising these important bills and allowing us to express our opinion on the matter.

⁵ Source for all student reporting: AAUW Educational Foundation. *Hostile Hallways: Bullying, Teasing, and Sexual Harassment in School*, 2001.